

There are more than 200 million Chinese youngsters learning how to speak English.

But only about 24,000 elementary and high school students in the United States are studying the Chinese language.

That second number needs to increase -- and quickly -- for the United States to continue building strong diplomatic and business relations with China, said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, during a presentation Monday at Winnetka's New Trier High School.

Kirk came to New Trier to introduce the U.S.-China Engagement Act, which proposes an additional \$20 million next year in federal aid for Chinese language and culture courses at the elementary and high school level. He was scheduled to introduce the bipartisan legislation Tuesday in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Kirk, who is co-sponsoring the bill with U.S. Rep. Rick Larsen of Washington, D-2nd, said the bill will double the funding for Chinese language training at all educational levels in the United States. He said United States students need to learn the language and culture to "expand the nuance, sophistication and ability of Americans to relate to China."

Kirk asked New Trier to host his presentation on the act, because of the school's rapidly growing Chinese language program, which will enroll about 175 students during the 2006-07 school year.

"New Trier High School is leading the country but the rest of the country needs to follow, and can do so with federal help," Kirk said during a joint presentation with Xu Jinzhong, the Chinese Consul General in Chicago, and a small group of local business and educational leaders. Greater understanding can yield not only political but also economic benefits to the United States, Kirk said, noting that American exports to China are rising by 15 percent each year.

"It's common sense that the two largest economies on Earth should place the highest priority on relations between the two countries," he said. "In my view, if the 21st century sees poor relations between Washington and Beijing, it will be a difficult century. If we take action now and

the relations between Washington and Beijing are good, strong, and strengthening, the chances for a happy century increase quite a bit."

Jinzhong praised New Trier for pioneering Chinese offerings at the high school level, and he also noted that the Chicago Public Schools have joined the effort, with 20 schools offering Chinese language programs.

In his remarks, Jinzhong emphasized that cooperation on the educational front -- including through exchange programs -- can lay the groundwork for collaboration on many other matters.

"I'm glad to see that people here have seen the importance of learning Chinese," he said.

He said his office is "always ready to support and assist" efforts to bring Chinese language programs to more schools in the area, and he hoped to start exchanges between teachers and professors from the Chicago area and from China.

Echoing Kirk and Jinzhong on the potential benefits of understanding the Chinese culture and language were several local business and educational leaders.

Speakers didn't mention the more controversial issues dividing the two countries -- including human rights abuses in China, focusing instead on the reality that engaging China can help the United States in both the political and financial spheres.

"With China as a partner, we can deal with issues of oil, Iran and nuclear proliferation, with missions that are really very important," said J.D. Bindenegel, Vice President of Community, Government and International Affairs at DePaul University. "We need an initiative like we have here to ensure we have people who have the skills -- from language to diplomatic skills -- to achieve that."

Besides offering language grants to educational agencies and schools, the act also would

include the following:

- \$6 million for new public diplomacy programs and the hiring of additional public diplomacy personnel in U.S. consulates in China, as well as \$150 million for the construction and staffing of an additional United States consulate in China.

- \$10 million to establish 10 additional United States diplomatic posts in China.

- provide \$6 million for exchange programs between colleges and universities in the United States and their counterparts in the People's Republic of China.

- \$10 million increase the number of full-time employees assigned to the United States and Foreign Commercial Service in China, including an additional 35 Commercial Service Officers.

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